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AUTHOR Montgomery, Donna; Sluss, Dorothy; Lewis, Jamie; Vervelde, Peggy; Prater, Greg; Minner, Sam

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ABSTRACT

Recreation is a significant part of a full and rich life but is frequently overlooked in relation to handicapped children. A project called Cross-Cultural Images aimed to improve the quality of life for handicapped children by teaching them avocational photography skills. The project involved mildly handicapped children aged 7-11 in Appalachia, on the Navajo Reservation, and along the Mexican border; special education teachers working in those areas; and faculty members and preservice educators at East Tennessee State University and Northern Arizona University. The project had four major components: teaching the children about photography (emphasizing subject selection, framing the shot, and use of light); allowing them the opportunity to take photographs (practice time followed by giving the students a simple one-time-use camera); mounting and displaying the exhibition (based on children's selections); and sharing the exhibition with children at other project sites. The students were very good at manipulating their cameras and ultimately produced images of high quality and interest. Several photographs were judged to be quite artistic and technically good by professional photographers who viewed the work. Although the students clearly acquired the knowledge and skill to do good work in photography, the most powerful project results were related to student pride and self-esteem. Suggestions are offered for project continuation and replication. (SV)

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Donna Montgomery, Ph.D.
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, TN

Dorothy Sluss, Ph.D.
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, TN

Jamie Lewis, J.D.
Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, AZ

Peggy Vervelde, Ph.D.
Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, AZ

Greg Prater, Ph.D.
Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, AZ

Sam Minner, Ph.D.
East Tennessee State University
Johnson City, TN

CROSS CULTURAL IMAGES: THE ETSU/NAU SPECIAL PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT

Parents and professionals commonly overlook the recreational and avocational needs of handicapped children. Handicapped children have great needs and many persons understandably focus on their academic and social needs, as well as their needs related to activities of daily living. These curricular areas are certainly important. But, recreation is also a significant part of a full and rich life. Recreational pursuits bring meaning to life, add variety to daily activities, and provide appropriate outlets for leisure time. Shannon (1985) found that a large number of handicapped children and adults spent most of their leisure time watching television and or listening to music. In many cases, these activities were done alone. Handicapped persons were socially isolated and often lacked the knowledge and skill to pursue more active and age-appropriate activities. Bigge (1991) described numerous games, hobbies, and crafts that handicapped children and adults could pursue. In some cases, adaptations had to be made for handicapped persons to successfully engage in the activity. In other cases, however, no adaptations were required. It was simply a matter of teaching handicapped persons about a specific recreational pursuit and then providing minimal support as they began the activity. One form of recreational pursuit mentioned by Bigge was photography.

Cameras have become simpler over time and it is now possible for a very inexpensive camera to produce a very high quality photograph. Unlike other art forms, photography is one that allows the novice to produce interesting and satisfying images without hours and hours of formal instruction. Engaging in avocational photography may result in other benefits as well. Producing nice photographic images may improve one's self esteem and there may be other adjunctive benefits (Minner, 1978).

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For these reasons, we planned and implemented a special project we called "Cross-Cultural Images". The goal of our project was to improve the quality of life for handicapped children by teaching them avocational photography skills. Our project involved handicapped children residing in three areas of the United States, special education teachers working in those three areas, and faculty members and preservice special educators working at two universities.

Support Of The Project

All of the project activities were supported by grants from the Foundation for Exceptional Children, the Southern Poverty Law Center, or internal resources. With these funds we purchased books, cameras, film developing, and a variety of frames, mats, and other materials to mount the photographic exhibitions.

Description Of Our Sites And The Children In Our Project

Our project included three distinctive sites---rural Appalachia, a small town on the Navajo Indian Reservation, and a town on the United States-Mexico border. Our Appalachian site was Johnson City, Tennessee. Johnson City is a medium sized city of about 50,000 in extreme East Tennessee. Though the city itself is home to a major regional university and the common amenities of urban life, it is located in a very rural area of the state and many of the children in Johnson City are from rural backgrounds and face many of the common challenges associated with rural life. The specific school site used in Johnson City was Mountain View Elementary School, a modern school serving the city's poorest families. The faculty at Mt. View places an emphasis on arts programming and the school supports several interesting initiatives including Suzuki string training, a piano lab, and a pottery workshop. The site on the Navajo Reservation was Pinon, Arizona. Pinon is a small and very remote community about seventy-five miles east of Flagstaff, Arizona. Though Pinon is on the Navajo reservation, it is quite close to the Hopi Reservation and consequently, some of the residents are Navajo, some are Hopi, and a few claim other tribal affiliations. There is a modern grocery store in Pinon, a Trading Post, and a few other local businesses. Pinon is a remote community. The road from Flagstaff to Pinon is often impassible during the winter months and many residents of the community live in traditional hogans or other homes far from paved roads. The third and final site in our project was located in Nogales, Arizona. Nogales is in Southern Arizona and is on the United States-Mexico border. Indeed, Nogales is a "twin city"---there is a Nogales, Arizona and a Nogales, Sonora. Nogales is a bustling trade center and has the ambience and character of many border communities.

In all cases, the children in our project were enrolled in special education programs. Students were mildly handicapped and ranged in ages from seven to eleven. Most of the children were from relatively poor families and many of them resided in rural, in some cases quite remote areas. The preservice special educators who worked in our project were enrolled in the Mt. View Partnership Program, the Pinon Partnership Program, or the La Frontera Program. All of these programs are school-based teacher preparation initiatives supported by East Tennessee State University and Northern Arizona University.

Components Of Our Program

Our project had four major components---teaching the children about photography, allowing them the opportunity to take photographs, mounting and displaying the exhibition, and sharing the exhibition with children at other sites.

To teach children about photography, we purchased some books of professional photography and asked them to look at the pictures. We selected books of professional photography, which represented the area each child was in. For example, we purchased books by Ansel Adams for the Navajo site and books by several Hispanic photographers for the Nogales site. After sharing these books for a time, we read the children a book titled "Click: A Book About Cameras and Taking Pictures" (Gibbons, 1997). This simply written book provides a colorful and informative instructional program in photography for young children. The components of a simple camera, tips for taking good indoor and outdoor pictures and camera care are all discussed. Afterward, we discussed three simple ideas---selecting an interesting subject, framing the shot, and use of light. To help our students remember and understand these concepts, we used the acronym "SFL". In terms of selecting interesting subjects for photographs (the "S" in our mnemonic), we emphasized the importance of taking pictures representative of children's unique geographical setting and cultural heritage. For students in Johnson City, we encouraged students to take pictures of the fall colors, the mountains and lakes in the region, and the animals on their farms. For the Navajo students, we encouraged them to take pictures of the mesas in the area, their homes, and the horses, cattle, and sheep their families kept. This component of our instructional program proved to be a bit difficult. Several children had difficulty understanding the kinds of images we ideally wanted them to capture on film. Through many examples and non-examples, many of our students seemed to acquire some understanding of what we were aiming for. However, most of the children also seemed very interested in taking some shots of their families and friends, their school, and of course, themselves. We attempted to balance our interest in capturing some images of each region with the children's' interest in using their own imaginations and making their own decisions.

We also worked with students in the area of framing (the "F" in our acronym). We talked about the importance of getting the main subject in the frame of the shot as well as the interesting effects when a photographer elects to not center the main subject in the frame, but rather place it off-center for dramatic effect. Finally, we talked about lighting (the "L" in the acronym). We discussed what happens when a picture is taken into the sun or another light source, the importance of adequate lighting, the use of the flash, etc.

Students seemed to both enjoy and understand these ideas and after the discussion, we allowed them to practice their skills with an instant image camera. In some cases, this was the first time children had been permitted to use or even handle a real camera. Finally, we gave simple one-time-use cameras to each child and told them to keep them for a period of two weeks and take some interesting shots. We referred to the children as photographers or artists and their careful handling of their cameras suggested that they also considered themselves to be quite special.

After a period of time, the students were given the developed pictures and asked to make their selections in order to devise their exhibitions. Students selected a variety of shots---some representing their unique physical locations and cultural backgrounds and some of their families, friends, and homes. We did not want to be overly prescriptive as the exhibitions were put together. Some pictures that meant a great deal to a given student were, in some cases, not the best pictures from our perspectives. Generally, we abided by the children's' wishes and supported their decisions. Pictures were framed and matted. Some were placed in albums. Then, the formal exhibitions were put together. We placed attractive tablecloths on several tables and arranged the pictures on the tables. The exhibitions were displayed in the local schools and in some cases, were also displayed in non-school locations (e.g., the exhibition from Johnson City was displayed in the school and in the foyer of the Education Building on the East Tennessee State University campus). At present, each exhibition is being sent to each site and eventually, each of our three

sites will receive each of the exhibitions. Teachers and students are free to contact each other by regular or e-mail and in some cases, teachers have devised instructional units, which pertain to each of the three geographical areas in our project.

Results

Students in our program demonstrated very good ability to manipulate their cameras and ultimately produce images of high quality and interest. Several of the photographs taken by the children in this project were judged to be quite artistic and technically good by professional photographers who viewed the work. Students were very interested in doing more work in photography. One student expressed interest in taking some photography classes when he went to the local high school. Another mentioned that he would be enrolling in a summer photography workshop held at a community art center. Though the students in our project clearly acquired the knowledge and skill to do good work in photography, the most powerful results of our project were related to the pride evidenced by so many of our students. At one of our sites, the exhibition was displayed during a school open house and many children and many parents attended the event. Both students and adults made many positive comments about the exhibition and the smiling faces of our photographers were a testament to the power of our work. Our budding artists were literally beaming. The spotlight was on them and in this case, the spotlight was one that put them in a most favorable light.

Conclusions

Our project was relatively low cost and required a minimum of human resources to complete. The book we used as our principle instructional tool was about $6.00 and each one-time-use camera cost about $5.00. Film development was about $4.00 and frames and mats were also inexpensive. For those interested in doing a similar project. we would recommend that local businesses be approached for possible donations. Also, it is possible that high school students in districts having a photography program in their curriculum do the film development. In terms of instructional suggestions, we found that our students learned the new concepts and skills quite readily. It was somewhat difficult to teach some students the notion of "a picture representing your cultural heritage", but rather surprisingly, most of our students came to understand even this idea. Clearly, the highlight of our work was the exhibitions held at each site. We would recommend that teachers build this event up as much as possible. Perhaps special invitations could be sent to the children's parents. Perhaps the local newspaper could be contacted and do a story on the event.

The most significant issue we experienced in our project pertained to its continuation. Many of our students wanted to do more. Much more. Though we took their interest as a very positive sign, we were hard pressed to think of creative ways to sustain their work. One site attempted to do this by training the students in the use of the school's digital camera. These cameras are simple to use, but rather expensive to purchase. However, students trained to use them may take pictures and print them on the school's equipment, thus saving the expenses associated with film development. Several of the students at this site learned to use the digital camera and became quite proficient at printing the images on the school's laser printer. Two of the students even learned to crop pictures and place decorative borders on them using simple photography programs owned by the school. For schools possessing such equipment, this is a good approach to use so students may continue to work in photography and continue to gain more skill and greater confidence.

In summary, all human beings need to acquire the knowledge, skill, and dispositions to engage in meaningful recreational activities. This is no less true for handicapped than for nonhandicpaped persons. Recreational activities enrich our lives. They make life interesting and fun. They are important for everyone. Many recreational activities may be pursed by disabled persons and we believe that photography is an excellent choice. It is relatively low cost and relatively easy for novices to rapidly acquire the skill necessary to produce nice work. We strongly encourage teachers to consider adding photography to their curricula.

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